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PROFESSOR CHARLES ELIOT NORTON

By WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER

Professor Charles Eliot Norton died in Cambridge, at Shady Hill, his birthplace and lifelong home, on October 21, 1908. He was born November 16, 1827, the son of Andrews and Katherine (Eliot) Norton; was graduated at Harvard College in the class of 1846; and after pursuing for nearly thirty years the life of scholar, citizen, and humanist, he was appointed, in 1875, Professor of the History of Art, at Harvard. This chair he resigned in 1898, owing to failing strength; but he continued for the next two or three years to offer to picked students a course in Dante. The first mention of this course appears in the Harvard catalogue for 1882-1883, but he did not give it that year nor the next. During the late winter and spring of 1886, however, Mr. Norton took Professor James Russell Lowell's place, and thenceforth, for some fifteen years, with only a few intermissions, his annual interpretation of *The Divine Comedy* was one of the chief jewels in the Harvard curriculum.

Down to 1877 Mr. Lowell had included Dante among his courses, but in that year he went on leave of absence as United States minister to Spain, whence he was transferred to London. During the late seventies and early eighties Mr. Norton used to meet a voluntary class of Dante students at his house, and for several seasons he gave public readings in English of *The Divine Comedy*. Out of these sprang his translation, published in 1891.

Mr. Norton's admiration for Dante went back to his undergraduate days, when Longfellow taught Spanish and Italian to students who chose to elect these subjects. A short visit to Italy in 1850 stimulated his interest in Italian, and during a second visit, in 1855-1856, of which he has left an attractive record in his *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy*, he perfected himself in the Italian language and in Dante lore. When he returned, his dear friend, Lowell, was installed as Smith professor, and thenceforth they pursued side by side their study of "the loftiest Poet who, like an eagle, soars above the others." A little later, in the

early sixties, Longfellow took up his translation of *The Divine Comedy*, and Lowell, Norton, and a few others gathered on Wednesday evening every week in the study at the Craigie House, listened to the new section of translation, pondered it, and gave to Longfellow suggestions, some of which, as he acknowledged, he gladly adopted. Mr. Howells, in his delightful volume, *Literary Friends and Acquaintances*, has described these meetings of the "Dante Club," to which he, then recently settled in Cambridge, was invited. "Those who were most constantly present," he says, "were Lowell and Professor Norton, but from time to time others came in, and we seldom sat down at the nine o'clock supper that followed the reading of the canto in less number than ten or twelve. The criticism, especially from the accomplished Dantists I have named, was frank and frequent."

Even before this Mr. Norton himself undertook to translate *The New Life*, the first specimens of which he printed in 1859. Thenceforward his quality as a Dantist was publicly recognized, and he promoted Dante culture through articles in the *North American Review*, of which he was a joint editor from 1862 to 1868, and later in the *Nation*. Thus he had been for many years an adept in Dante before, from his chair at Harvard, he gave such interpretations not merely of *The Divine Comedy*, but of the epoch and world out of which it arose, as have had no counterparts in America.

A few years ago I asked him for information in regard to the founding of the Dante Society, and he replied in a letter dated July 29, 1904, from which I quote:

It was, I think, in 1880 that some members of the class which I was conducting in *The Divine Comedy*, hearing me speak of the possible service which a club for the promotion of Dante studies might render, came to me to say that they wished such a club might be founded, and would be glad to do what might be in their power to give it a good start. (I recall especially John Woodbury [now secretary of the Metropolitan Park Commission] and Professor Hart as interested in the matter.) I told them that I thought that the success of the effort would depend on whether Mr. Longfellow would consent to take the presidency of the proposed society, and that I would consult with him about it. Longfellow was cordial in his approval of the scheme. He saw in it, especially, the means by which the Dante library of Harvard might be strengthened and steadily increased, and also he believed that such a society as was proposed might justify its existence by undertaking the publication of the *Comment*

on *The Divine Comedy* of Benvenuto da Imola, of which only fragments had hitherto been printed. This had long been an object of desire with him, and he and I had often talked of how to bring it about. The existence of a society, the members of which could be appealed to, to contribute to the cost of copying the manuscript of the *Comment* and to the further cost of printing it, seemed to open the way to the accomplishment of a work of the first importance to all students of *The Divine Comedy*.

Longfellow readily consented to be president of the society. A few persons were asked to become members. A meeting of them was held at the Craigie House, and Longfellow was, as usual, the most genial and delightful of hosts. I think more than one meeting was held there; bylaws were adopted, officers were elected, circulars were prepared, the aims of the society were thoroughly discussed, it was determined to send to Florence for a copy of the Benvenuto manuscript of the *Comment*, and, if I remember rightly, Longfellow undertook to defray the cost of the copy.

So was founded the Dante Society, which for nearly thirty years has persevered in the mission then laid down for it. It has called out several important studies in Dante, achieved two invaluable concordances, stimulated by its annual prize the zeal of university students for research and criticism, and contributed to the assembling in the Harvard Library of a Dante collection accessible to scholars throughout the East and second in range only to that given by Professor Willard Fiske to Cornell University. In his account of the founding, Mr. Norton, with characteristic modesty, attributes to Mr. Longfellow's coöperation the element indispensable to success; but, in fact, as the original members will be the first to testify, it was Mr. Norton himself whose active sympathy created the society and caused it to flourish as long as he lived. Mr. Longfellow served it as its first president, — a beautiful and willing figurehead, lacking neither in helpful counsel nor in practical support. On his death, in 1882, James Russell Lowell was chosen to succeed him; but Lowell was then in England, nor did he ever, after coming home in 1885, take root again in Cambridge. But his name shed a far luster, and his favor and advice sustained the prestige of the society. When he died, in 1891, Mr. Norton became president.

Thenceforward, every May, on the evening of the third Tuesday of the month, he held the annual meeting at Shady Hill, and nobody who attended one of those meetings will ever forget the way in which he presided, so informally, yet with that unflinching dignity of which he alone

seemed to have the secret. In a few penetrating sentences he would review each of the half dozen Dante books of the year; point out new work that the society might undertake; praise, in words which held no flattery, the labors of Professor Sheldon and his colleagues on the concordance; and summarize the quality of the essays handed in to compete for the Dante Prize. Until a year or two ago, — indeed, until last year, — though he seemed at each season a little frailer in body, we noticed no slackening of intellectual vigor; but last year, while his mind was as clear as ever, he asked Professor Grandgent to give an account of the new publications which he had himself been unable through illness to keep abreast of. To the end, however, the "gracious amity and unequalled intuitions," which Mr. Howells recalls of him at the meetings at Longfellow's forty years before, shone in his manner and in his criticism. Almost his last words, before the meeting of the society in 1908 broke up, were to urge that Dante be read *naturally*, for his evident meaning, and especially for his significance to us to-day, and neither as a maker of linguistic and philological puzzles, nor as a conscious exploiter of recondite theories.

In 1891 Professor Norton published his prose translation of *The Divine Comedy*, — a work which at once took its place as the best. It is hardly likely to be superseded, for metrical translators of Dante sacrifice too much of his meaning in order to give us a metrical residue which in nowise corresponds to his *terza rima*. It is significant that the best metrical version in English, Longfellow's, in hendecasyllabic blank verse, comes nearest to prose. Readers to whom the originals of the few world masterpieces are inaccessible will more and more resort to the best prose renderings. Among these Norton's *Divine Comedy* unquestionably belongs. To understand the care with which he worked, one should compare the first edition of his translation with the last. In the intervening ten years he literally went over every word afresh, weighed every phrase, listened to every new suggestion, and made even commas serve instead of exegesis. His critical faculty was so delicate and so exacting that he was satisfied with nothing short of perfection in his own writing. "It is the final thumb-nail touches," he used to say to me, "that count."

Besides his translation of *The Divine Comedy* he brought out a revision of *The New Life*, and he contributed to Warner's Library a monograph, unfortunately too brief, on Dante's career and genius. The latter fragment

was compiled in part from lectures delivered by him on the Turnbull Foundation at Baltimore. He could never be persuaded to amplify them into a volume which should transmit to posterity the interpretation and criticism of the foremost English-speaking Dantist of his time.

I call Mr. Norton the foremost Dantist advisedly, for I had the rare privilege of being a pupil both of him and of Lowell, whom Norton himself called his master. But Lowell was never the minute and indefatigable searcher of texts that Norton was; and Lowell never felt Dante as Norton felt him. Lowell's essay will long deserve to be read, not only because it is one of the best literary essays produced in America, but also because in its wit, in its flashes of insight, in its occasional waywardness, and in its Romanticist exuberance, it is characteristic of his brilliant talents. But to read Dante with Mr. Norton was almost an act of worship. There was in his voice something wonderfully stirring and wholly incommunicable. As he reached a favorite passage his face became radiant and his tones more tender. He explained fully from every side, — verbal, textual, literary, spiritual; and even when he did not pause to suggest the parallel between Dante's examples and our modern instances, he left no doubt of their pertinence to ourselves. Yet with all this there was no hint of preaching, no attempt, so common among German expounders, to twist Dante's text to fit a theory.

Looking back upon those hours of high instruction, I find it hard to say whether the final impression Mr. Norton's illumination of *The Divine Comedy* made upon me concerned the spiritual significance or the supreme beauty of the poem. That one should blend into the other was, after all, what he intended, for he never divorced the spiritual from the beautiful. If he held that those who would render Beauty didactic surely destroy her charm, he knew also the origin and the function of Art-for-Art's-sake Beauty. In his interpretation of Dante he had one immense advantage which neither Lowell nor any other English-speaking Dantist has possessed: he had a specialist's knowledge of medieval art. So the thirteenth century lived for him not merely in its poetry, theology, and chronicles, but in its paintings and statues, in its churches and town halls, in its palaces and dwellings. These arts, needless to say, had then an extraordinary representative value which they do not possess at all to-day; and only he who knows them intimately can compass the whole circle of the experience and the ideals of that world of which *The Divine*

Comedy is the supreme expression in language. Mr. Norton had this erudition, but, as was his wont, he never gave it out as mere erudition; he always vitalized it by his sympathy, and so endued it with immediate human interest. He scorned loose thinking; he despised inaccuracy or misstatement. His critical keenness made him instinctively take care to be sure of his facts, but he unconsciously presented his facts with charm, as Nature hides pollen or seeds in her flowers.

Let us hope that this society which he founded, this outpost of culture which he cherished for nearly thirty years, will continue in the work he desired for it. He felt, as every one must feel who has drawn close to Dante, that it is of immense importance that the study of *The Divine Comedy* should be promoted. The contrast it sets up between our transitional society and that of thirteenth-century Italy; its embodiment of what was for more than a thousand years the religion of Christendom; the pure delight of it as poetry; and the fact that, better than any other literary masterpiece, it teaches the supreme knowledge,—how a man may make himself eternal; these are some of the reasons, if reasons be required, for dedicating ourselves to the perpetuation of Dante's epic. And as long as any of us who knew Charles Eliot Norton survive, we shall feel that his benign influence accompanies us and bids us Godspeed.